

**Remarks by Barry R. McCaffrey
Director, Office of National Drug Control Policy
at Memorial Ceremony for Vietnam Veterans**

Thanks very much, Jan, for that great introduction. Jill and I are honored to be here. We want to thank Senator Chuck Hagel for being the keynote speaker and for his leadership. Of special note: the Senator and his brother are both combat vets. Chuck was a squad leader in the 9th ID, and his presence, his involvement -- along with the other seven U.S. senators and nine congressmen who fought in Southeast Asia -- is vital to what we are trying to accomplish. Let me mention that B Co., 2/7th Cav., did have a reunion. In the last two days, we've all come together -- the first sergeant, squad leaders, platoon sergeants -- most of them wearing purple hearts, to remember the people who couldn't be here for today's reunion. I thank all of you for your courage, dedication in combat, and the joy of seeing you again.

Let me just say, very briefly, that we're here to honor not only those who came back but those who never came home. The ceremony at this site brings to mind three and-a-half million of us who served in Southeast Asia and eight million who are Vietnam-era veterans. We are now the biggest group of surviving veterans. We must take into consideration not just those of us who were privileged to be in uniform but also our families -- mothers, fathers, wives, and children who waited in anticipation for us to come back. Let me say quite bluntly what's in my heart when I deal with Vietnam veterans. It is a memory that the country did not treat any of you with the respect, support, and compassion you deserved. It was a shameful blot on our country's history to send young men and women off to this terrible struggle and then use our troops as objects of blame for the divisive political struggle that ripped the nation apart for a decade. Never again!

It's particularly poignant standing here on this hallowed ground. We're right in front of 58,000 of our buddies who died. We're also remembering 303,000 who were wounded. The bloodshed was terrible. The suffering has not ended yet. At least 80,000 of our buddies are still severely disabled and in Veterans Administration hospitals or under their care. Six percent of our comrades are drug-abuse dependent. Eleven percent are alcohol dependent. Many are homeless, and others suffer from war-related psychological or physical problems. I remind us of these facts to underscore that this heavy human toll demands that we as Americans vigorously support the finest possible health-care in our Veterans Administration facilities and that we sustain strong outreach programs to assist vets who are suffering from drug or alcohol problems and physical or emotional wounds. Our nation needs to make the sacrifice for those who sacrificed so much in Vietnam.

A couple of words about who we were. A few thousand of us are privileged to be at this ceremony today. We were the youngest people who ever fought in one of our country's wars. Our average age was nineteen years old. Sixty percent of those killed, whose names are on this wall behind us, were twenty-one years old or younger. In my unit, almost all of us were between eighteen and twenty-two, except for the first sergeant

and me. We were young men who basically turned into hardened combat soldiers as we grew up under fire. We also represented the face of America, men and women, rich and poor. Eleven percent of our numbers were African American; 5 percent were Hispanic. We were the best educated troops that ever served in combat. Seventy-nine percent of us had a high school education. It may come as a surprise when I say that most of us were volunteers. Many of our best combat soldiers were drafted, but more than 70 percent of the Americans killed in action were volunteers. We also paid an enormously high price for our service. Harry Summers wrote in an article that a grunt in the 25th Infantry Division had a 75 percent chance of being killed or wounded. One in four Marines who served in Vietnam became a combat casualty. We suffered amputations or crippling wounds at a rate 300 percent higher than WWII veterans. Finally, we served with enormous honor. Ninety-seven percent of us received honorable discharges. It also comes as a surprise to the news media when I tell people that Vietnam vets are doing pretty well. We have incomes higher than our non-veteran counterparts and an employment rate that is actually a third higher than those who never served in the armed forces.

Let me turn to what we learned. The war ended in 1975, more than twenty-two years ago. Most of us are now twenty-nine to thirty years removed from combat. The historians are still trying to sort all this out, sifting through mountains of documents. I'd suggest that many of us in this crowd already know what came out of that war. The country learned a number of lessons.

- First of all, we must not commit our youth to war without the support of the American people. In a democracy, lack of such support produces catastrophic divisiveness and a weakening of national will that is essential to winning.
- Second, we must not send our sons and daughters to war without a clear understanding of national aims and the cost of achieving them.
- Third, we need to understand that war is not theoretical business. When we make a decision to fight, the victory will be paid for in blood. The cost of combat is never free.
- Finally, if you allow me to say what you and I learned as individuals, as sailors, marines, airmen, and soldiers: we understand that to survive and succeed, when conditions are appalling and your life is on the line, requires moral and physical courage, competence, self-discipline, and -- most importantly -- trust in your buddies.

The Vietnam vets have a future. This is not all about the past. It seems to me that there are three things we need to do.

- First of all, we need to help our veterans from the Vietnam era who are in need. Some people are out there suffering. We've got to get involved in state and local organizations and the great veterans organizations. We've got to offer our energy, time, and leadership.

- Second, we need a national program to combat the abuse of alcohol and drugs. Many of our buddies are suffering from alcohol and drug dependency, and we're going to have to help them.
- Finally, it seems to me most important to offer our leadership to our communities. This country works from the bottom up, not from the top down. The same commitment, discipline, and leadership you showed in combat are needed in your hometowns.

Let me end by reminding all of us that we're standing here in memory of 58,000 dead. I picked a passage out of a WWI poem by Laurence Binyon. I think the words apply to you and me as we think back to those years:

They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old,
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn,
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

God bless you, Vietnam veterans.